

ISRAEL SERMON
RH AM, 5777
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Israel. I need only say the word, and people feel a surge of emotions. If I then continue to speak about Israel, these emotions will color what people hear. Many years ago, after spending a month in Israel, I wrote an email to my friends reflecting on my experiences there. I received two opposite responses to the very same email. One accused me of being a rabid Zionist. The other, of being a Palestinian sympathizer. So Israel is a subject ripe for misunderstandings.

One of the themes I would like to emphasize during High Holy Days this year is the importance of listening. In fact, listening is one of the themes of the holidays. Hearing the shofar – not blowing it – is the mitzvah for Rosh Hashanah. One of the readings for the first day of Rosh Hashanah is the story of Hagar and Ishmael's abandonment in the desert. Hagar lifts her voice and weeps over her son's suffering – and God HEARS the sound of her boy's cries. One of the Haftarah choices for Rosh Hashanah is the story of Hannah who is barren but yearns for a baby. She goes to the Temple to pray silently. The High Priest, Eli, assumes she is drunk and admonishes her because he does not hear her voice.¹

¹ Thank you to Rabbi David Stern for pointing out this theme.

Today, our society has become so polarized that we no longer hear the voice of the other. I do not believe we can achieve harmony in our community without sharing each other's stories – and this will involve pain as well as joy. This is the case particularly for Israel, which is my subject this morning.

As most of you know, I spent part of my sabbatical this past summer in Israel. In addition to studying the many facets of Jewish identity at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, I was part of a delegation of rabbis on an AIPAC educational mission. AIPAC, as you know, is the very successful and powerful pro-Israel lobby.

I don't need to tell you how complicated the situation in Israel is.

As a vibrant democracy, Israel allows for disagreements on just about anything. I would like to expose you to a pastiche of the voices I heard while I was there, to give you a sense of the complex quilt that is this tiny but mighty country.

My hope is that you will come away with a more nuanced view of this land, our ancestral home. If you feel more confused by the end of my sermon, then welcome to the reality of Israel. Please be advised that some of this may be hard for you to hear, but please try to be open to these voices. Please know that my goal here is to offer them to you, not to press my opinion onto you or to argue for any one point of view.

I'll start with the obvious. Israelis are incredibly smart.

This start-up nation has made the most amazing advances in high tech, as you all know. This has benefited a whole range of people and causes.

One such organization is the Issie Shapiro Educational Center which has developed pioneering therapies for developmentally challenged children and adults.



Their models are used throughout Israel and the world.

One such technological advance is a waterproof eye gaze system that gives children who are unable to communicate verbally the ability to participate in water sports and hydrotherapy.



Project Go enables people with spinal cord injuries, ALS, and MS, who cannot use their hands, independent control over smartphones and tablets.

In the Rehabilitation Center, The Snoezelen Multi-Sensory Environment helps to relax and focus people with cognitive and sensory difficulties.



A couple of our rabbis did due diligence by testing the room themselves.



Israel's expertise in technology has resulted in a very sophisticated, multi-layered missile defense system, the most advanced in the world, which includes the Iron Dome and David's Sling.

The Israelis are currently ahead of the threat on their borders, which includes 100,000 Hezbollah missiles, a higher number than for all of NATO. These Hezbollah missiles are hidden in Lebanese villages just down the hill from the Galilee.



We were briefed by Col. Haim Moriya, Air and Missile Defense Consultant,



who told us that there is no place in Israel that is 100% safe anymore: Israel's enemies, which include Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Iran have missiles that can cover the country twice over.

When you go up to the Galilee and on the Golan Heights, as many of you have done, it is astonishing to see how close these enemies are.



An as-yet-to-be determined threat is the former state of Syria, right down the hill from the Golan. Up until 5 years ago, this was Israel's quietest border, Col. Miri Eisin told us, but the war that has unfolded has brought new enemies:



the Al Nusra Front, an arm of Al Qaeda, at one end, ISIS on the other. Syrian President Bashar Al Assad brought in Hezbollah, the terrorist organization in Lebanon, to fight in Syria, so Hezbollah has gained valuable military skills it did not have before.

And yet, despite Syria's enmity, Israel is treating Syria's war-wounded soldiers, no questions asked as to what side the soldier is on. We were shown the underground surgery center of the Galilee Medical Center in Nahariya, which has treated 1,300 Syrian soldiers over the past 3 and ½ years.



The Center is run by Dr. Masad Barhoum, a Christian Arab, who insists that his Muslim, Druse, Christian and Jewish employees steer clear of conflicts with each other – at least at work.

Dr. Barhoum told us that he is proud to be an Israeli and proud of his country. Yet as a minority, he says he has had to work 1,000 harder to get ahead.



He credits his parents for giving him the fortitude to do so. When he was in medical school during one of the wars with Lebanon, for example, Israelis told him that he did not belong there. His parents advised him, saying: “This is your country too and you have every right to be here.” They counseled him to always look ahead to the future, not to look back. This advice has held him in good stead.

The challenges of being a minority in Israel were underlined by several people. Samer Ahtamaneh is Co-director of Givat Haviva’s Education Department.



This Institute brings together Israeli Arabs and Jews in schools, municipalities, and businesses to promote understanding and cooperation.



Samir is another Arab Israeli we met who spoke of his pride in being a citizen of Israel, while also decrying the discrimination he has faced as an Arab. This has included: being taken off a bus for questioning the first time he traveled away from home, even after showing his Israeli ID; not being allowed into a dance club; being repeatedly questioned at the airport in front of his children. His wife was also forced to strip at an airport security point. He says he believes that Israel must adhere to the values expressed in her Declaration of Independence, which guarantees equal rights for all its citizens. He continues to work for better relations between Arabs and Jews, asserting that the problem comes down to a lack of communication and knowledge of one another. He attributes his optimism and perseverance to his parents who said to him that in order to change the reality around him, one must first change oneself.



Tal Becker, one of the Hartman scholars, encapsulated the challenge of trust between Arab Israelis and Jews.

He told us: “I said to my wife that I was going to take a taxi.”
“Look and make sure it’s not a Palestinian driver,” she warned.
“I am not going to do that,” Becker told his wife. “I don’t want to assume that all Palestinians are terrorists.” Then Becker said, his daughter wanted to take a taxi. That changed the equation.

And this is the kind of fear, legitimate or not, that explains the continuing election of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, according to Jerusalem Post senior political analyst Herb Keinon. Israel, he says, is a country “mugged by reality” –



the reality of “terror on the street,” the reality of the second intifada that followed the Oslo accords, the reality that every Israeli parent must send their children to the army, the reality of constant war. Keinon maintains that, considering what the country has been through, it is a wonder there is not more racism. Keinon asserted that the country does not love Netanyahu, but he radiates a sense that the country is safer when he is in power.

Which is why the Israeli presence continues on Jordan's West Bank – what some refer to by the biblical names of Judea and Samaria.



This area is home to 2.4 million Palestinians and over 400,000 Jewish settlers. Many Israelis fear that what happened in Gaza will happen there – following withdrawal by Israel, a takeover by the terrorist organization, Hamas. Keinon said that a need for security trumps other concerns. But for others, the real security threat is Israel's military presence in the West Bank, what they call The Occupation, because it inflames the anger of the Palestinians. One of the most challenging experiences for myself and the other rabbis on the AIPAC mission was witnessing the thousands of Palestinian workers entering Israel from Bethlehem at the Rachel Border crossing.



Yes, we understood the need to ensure safety at the border, and yes, the commander from the Israeli Defense Force was very concerned about the humanitarian treatment of these Palestinians –



but there was still something demeaning and humiliating about the need to go through a security check point at 5 AM that lasts on average 45 minutes, every single day, then waiting on the other side to be picked up for work.



Breaking the Silence is a group of 1,000 soldiers who believe the Occupation must end. They have documented the toll that The Occupation takes on the soldiers who enforce it.

AIPAC introduced us to one of the organization's co-founders, and I went on a field trip sponsored by the group.



We heard testimony from soldiers – one stood out in particular. “I was ashamed of myself,” he said, “when I realized I enjoyed power [over the Palestinians]...not just enjoyed it...but it became addictive.” I visited the South Hebron Hills, part of the West Bank that would be part of a future Palestinian State. We were told that 95 percent of the building permits requested by Palestinians are denied. As a result, houses are built without permits and can expect to be demolished within an average of 3 to 6 months.



Palestinians, we were told, are denied access to the agricultural lands they farm as well as to needed water when security zones are declared around settlements; settler violence also pushes Palestinians off the land.

AIPAC introduced us to a representative from My Truth, “a grass roots organization comprised of IDF reserve soldiers who seek to share the values and experiences of Israeli soldiers and show the high moral standards they strive to meet.”²



Its co-founder, Matan Katzman, disputed the claims of Breaking the Silence, focusing instead on the toll that dealing with terrorism is having on the IDF soldiers.

Of course, contradictions abound in Israel. There is settler violence, and there are settlers who make every effort to establish positive relations with their Palestinian neighbors. Meet the mayor of Efrat, part of the settlement called Gush Etzion that would most probably remain part of Israel should a two-state solution ever be worked out.



² From their web site.

Most of the inhabitants are there, not for ideological reasons, but for quality of life and affordability.



Mayor Oded Ravivi believes that fences do not provide security: fences only offer a challenge to the enemy to find ways to overcome it. He does not believe in building fences but in building bridges to his Arab neighbors, and he has successfully done so. But that does not mean that it is smooth or easy sailing. On his first day in office, Mayor Ravivi went to the chief of one of the Arab villages, Wadi Nis. He said to him: One of the obstacles that inhibits understanding between our people is the language barrier. I will pay to have your teachers come to my town to teach Jewish children Arabic. The village chief was bowled over but said he was unable to accept the offer – apparently because he would be seen as a collaborator. However, cooperation has existed unofficially and underground. At the same time, the mayor told us that, should there be a future Palestinian state, these villages would prefer to remain inside the Israeli border than under the Palestinian authority.

Or meet settler Yehudah Glick from Otniel, an Orthodox Israeli settlement in the southern Judean Mountains, south of Hebron in the West Bank.



We were quite surprised to hear his perspective, expecting him to be a hard-line anti-Arab. Glick resigned from the Immigration Ministry when Israel disengaged from Gaza because he was opposed to it. Recently, he was unexpectedly elected to the Knesset as a member of the Likud. Glick believes in a one-state solution, with Jews and Arabs as equal citizens, co-existing peacefully. He said that anyone involved in terror, whether Arab or Jew, would be denied citizenship. He has many friends who are Palestinian, as he tries to live out the biblical injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself. He has worked to make the Temple Mount a place of prayer for all people, including Jews – right now Jews cannot pray on the site where two major mosques sit. Glick established the Temple Mount Foundation to try and turn it into a world center for peace. For this he was shot at point blank range by an Arab terrorist two years ago, and was not expected to survive.

He clearly has respect for his fellow Knesset member, Meirav Michaeli, on the opposite side of the political aisle.



Michaeli is a member of the Labor Party and a staunch feminist. In turn, she calls Yehuda Glick “a real mensch.” She she believes that security can only be achieved through peace which, in her eyes, means a two-state solution. Is there a partner on the other side? She says it is not clear but she remains optimistic, telling us that optimism is a political choice.

Despite her optimism, there are clearly both Jews and Palestinians who are opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state. We met with Dr. Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian Authority’s Chief Negotiator.



In 1979, Erekat wrote an editorial calling on the Palestinians to recognize Israel and calling for a two-state solution.

The result was that his family's lives were threatened.

Having been involved in peace negotiations for many years, he expressed bitterness and deep frustration over the fact that the Palestinians still do not have a state.

He does not believe that the Israelis are serious about two states or they would not continue to build settlements.

Of course the same accusations have been leveled against the Palestinians, that no matter what is offered, they keep walking away from negotiations.

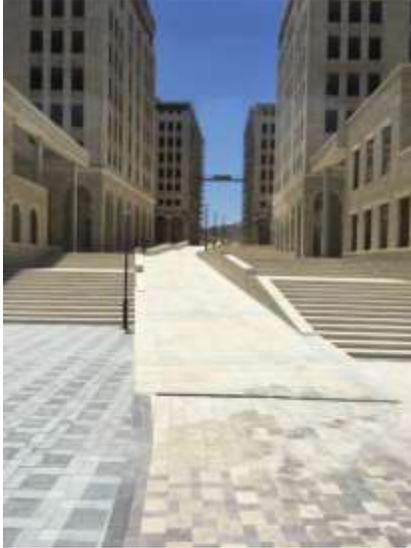
One hopeful sign is that there are new realities in the Middle East.

Alliances have been building between Israel and Sunni Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt in their effort to defeat ISIS.

Some have suggested that this might result in the possibility of a new deal between Israel and the Palestinians. May it only be so.

There is so much more that I saw and experienced –

the Palestinian city of Rawabi in the West Bank, an amazing planned city with 5,000 housing units, replete with tennis courts, and soccer fields, and volley ball courts, and shops awaiting such brand names as Kenneth Cole, an amphitheater for 14,000.



The city is the brainchild of Palestinian entrepreneur Bashar Mari. He told us he was fed up with waiting for the Israelis and the rest of the world to take care of the Palestinians. He was also tired of the Palestinian Authority's corruption and broken promises.



So he invested his own money in Rawabi. Both the Israeli and the Palestinian governments made this very difficult for him. For example, he said it took two years for Israel to grant the project use of a small access road through which his construction trucks could pass. And he has been criticized by Palestinians who claim that the project is a betrayal, normalizing the Occupation.

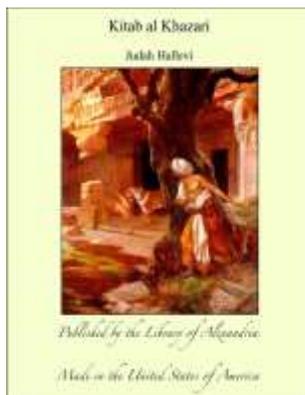
What does all this mean for the future of Israel? I don't know.

Will we ever come to a place of peace, and how? Again, I don't know.

What I do know is that what is most important for the future of Israel is for people to talk to one another, to listen to each other.

And this is very hard work. As the Hartman Institute's Tal Becker told us: both sides are very committed to their own story. Both sides feel victimized, both sides see the other as the villain. Maintaining this stance will get us nowhere. We have to be willing to have true compassion for each other's pain and the only way to do that is to engage in dialogue.

There are, of course, some groups doing just that. They are a model for us. So are stories from our tradition.



The medieval sage, Judah HaLevi, writes about the King of the Kuzaris who is looking for a spiritual path.

He calls in a philosopher, a priest, an imam and a rabbi.

He engages in a series of questions and answers with the rabbi, whom he calls "friend." As Hartman Institute's Melilah Hellner-Eshed explains, in the end, through dialogue, BOTH the King and the rabbi change. The King decides to convert to Judaism, embracing the story of the Jewish people.

And the rabbi, realizing he does not have a good answer to the King's question about why he does not live in Israel, picks up and moves to the holy Land.

May the shofar awaken us to each other's narrative.

May we too be willing to hear the other's story and to consider the possibility of another point of view.

May we, too, be brave enough to listen to each other, to ask each other deep questions, and to allow ourselves to be moved, not just intellectually, but emotionally as well.